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INTRODUCTION TO PART THREE:  
A SOCIO-CULTURAL  
PERSPECTIVE ON READING

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This part of the book should make you begin to question some of the assumptions of Parts One and Two, particularly some assumptions of the cognitive-psychological perspective, and encourage you to be more aware of the complexity of issues associated with how a child learns to read and how a child reads for a variety of purposes. In taking on board a socio-cultural stance on reading, you are likely to be more critical of the simplistic accounts of reading and literacy that we so frequently encounter, say in the media, and become more sophisticated in your thinking about what words like 'literacy' and 'illiteracy' signify.

Some of the ideas discussed by the scholars who feature here were also flagged by our first two scholars. However, both Henrietta Donbey and Mary Hilton are very explicit in their references to themes associated with socio-cultural aspects of reading and much of what they had to say about Stephen and about their own underlying philosophy of reading can be linked directly to socio-cultural theory. This part of the book begins with transcripts of the interviews conducted with both these scholars. This will be followed by a detailed discussion of some of the issues raised in their interviews and will consider, in particular, the implications of this perspective for literacy teaching.

## HENRIETTA DOMBEY'S OBSERVATIONS, SUGGESTIONS AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

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This section briefly profiles Henrietta Dombey and her work. It then presents her interpretation of Stephen and her recommendations for taking him forward. The theory of reading underpinning her suggestions is signalled throughout her comments, suggestions and ideas. Like several others whose perspectives on Stephen are presented in this book, Henrietta participated in a symposium on this theme at the United Kingdom Reading Association's annual conference in Oxford 2000. What follows is based on that presentation and an interview I conducted with her in November 2001. Her responses below are entirely her own words as recorded in a face-to-face interview. The final part draws more directly on her conference paper.

### **Brief profile of Henrietta Dombey**

Initially educated as a secondary English teacher, Henrietta swiftly moved into primary teaching where she felt children's encounters with words could more easily be enriched by visual images, concrete materials and movement. This kindled a long fascination with the processes involved as children develop a command of literacy, enlarged by her experiences in teacher education. Her research has focused on the kinds of classroom interactions between children, teachers and texts that seem productive of important literacy lessons. Henrietta is Professor of Literacy Education at the University of Brighton.

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### **Interpreting the visual evidence**

First I would like to say that to use videotape for an enquiry of this sort is an excellent idea as you get all sorts of visual indications that amplify the sound track. We see the teacher looking at Stephen in a supportive and encouraging way, taking account of how he seems and giving him space – that's very evident in the video. What we also see is an uncomfortable and dutiful boy who is conscious that the camera is on him – he flicks his eye towards the camera at times, but I think he's more dominated by some obligation to his teacher whom he obviously respects. His eyes follow the text when his teacher is reading, and he does what she asks of him. But there is no clear sense from the visual evidence of his involvement in the text. (I don't think that comes through either when we look closely at his words and the way he speaks them.) Although he looks amused at points, he also seems tense and nervous and his arms are held very rigidly. At the very beginning he doesn't choose a book to read with much eagerness. And at the very end he tries to get away as soon as he can. He makes one little comment, 'funny', which doesn't show much involvement.

### **His retelling**

Stephen's intonation patterns support my interpretation of the visual evidence in that he reads with flat intonation, and while this shouldn't always be taken as an incontrovertible indicator of lack of interest or commitment, in this case it merely reinforces the view gained from the visual evidence.

On other evidence you could say his retelling is largely implicit, and that it lacks any sense of dynamic. You don't get a feeling of the inherent movement of the story. It doesn't come through at all in his retelling and what he does produce only comes after lots of prompting from his teacher. So he really is not retelling in any significant way. He's certainly not creating any sort of interesting experience for a listener. He's responding to a test situation. The whole thing is for him a test. It's a test that is, as it were, kindly delivered by the teacher but it's not a task that he takes on and makes his own. The retelling is not something that he rises to and enriches with his own experience of life and text and, I mean, he doesn't put all his energies into this.

### **His reading**

Stephen makes very little use of picture cues unless he's prompted. He makes very little use of context cues and some of his misuses show

he's really going off the semantic rails. So what we have here is someone who is in a test situation who is not bringing in information from outside, whether of life or of other texts, to any significant degree. There are some minor things that indicate some familiarity with book language – looked/look, for instance, indicates a certain familiarity with book language.

Yet he's not got to grips with the story. If you get down to the phonic level he appears to have a bit of phonic knowledge. He isn't actively engaged with this task of reading. He is perfunctorily responding to a teacher-set task. But he is doing it with good grace.

### Henrietta's hunches about Stephen and what she'd like to know

I'd like to know quite a bit more about Stephen. Maybe I've chanced my arm too far anyway. I'd suspect that he's not generally engaged with the written word. I'd suspect that he would have great difficulty with writing, seeing it as a task or sort of test to be completed, and not as a means of communication, much less as a means of ordering and systematizing and developing his thinking. The chances of him being like that are very slight indeed. That's a hunch. All of these literacy activities I think he would see as tasks to be completed before you go out to play.

But to get a fuller picture of him I'd like to know a range of things, some of them are to do with what Myra Barrs calls small shapes and some are to do with big shapes. Some are to do with the overall significance of literacy in his life.

### Significance of reading in Stephen's life

I'd like to know whether he has a favourite book, what books he has at home, whether he's a member of a public library or book club, whether he readily goes to any written text, for example, a tuneable for information or whether he's one of the many children still who actually conduct a large part of their lives through oral encounters, only resorting to the written word when they absolutely have to.

I'd like to know whether he reads frequently with or to a parent at home, and if so, which gender. I suspect that, like the very many boys in Gemma Moss's study, Stephen does not see reading or writing as a central part of his social identity. I suspect that (and I think the video recording was made when Pokémon cards were in vogue) he may well collect the Pokémon cards but is unlikely to engage with any written text. I'd be interested to see whether computers are of any interest to

him, and if so, whether computer games or computer magazines would feature at all.

In general, I would like to find out what meaning literacy holds for Stephen. What kind of active dynamic is he calling up when he confronts a text? I suspect that he's operating at a rather limited, word identification level and with some access to literal meaning but without any kind of, as it were, determination to construct a more coherent and complex meaning. To him, it seems, that is not the name of the game. However, to state this with any degree of certainty, I would have to observe Stephen in a range of different situations.

### The nature of Stephen's involvement with literacy in and out of school

In other words, I suspect that the culture in which he moves for much of his life, out of school and in the playground, is not one in which literacy figures large. But I suspect that also he doesn't seem to be a kind of active rebel. I suspect that he might be susceptible to concerted attempts to interest him and involve him in literacy. But I'm jumping ahead here; what I should be saying, at this point, is that I think that all these things would need to be looked at quite closely.

What does he do with books in school?

How does he actually interpret and approach reading and writing tasks?

Is there any point in the day when he's actively engaged in constructing or interpreting text? Also, how much is he read to in school?

And it would be very interesting to see, if and when his teacher does read to the class, what he makes of these literacy events.

What kinds of texts does he steer himself towards?

Are these information texts, stories, poems, or comics or just Pokémon cards?

And if they are information texts, is he just pretending to read as Gemma Moss found some boys do?

Teachers in busy classrooms with upward of twenty-five children can't observe every child's encounter with the written word, desirable though that might be.

Does he pull the wool?

Is he evading print?

Is he actively entering into some kind of subterfuge?

I also think it's worth looking at whether he reads collaboratively with others, whether, like the children studied in Croydon by Linda Graham, he can become more engaged with texts as a collaborative activity, whether it is that lone encounter that he finds constructing,

difficult, unrewarding, threatening. In general, how he goes about his reading during the school day would repay investigation.

Also I would suggest looking to see what phonic knowledge he has, how he draws on this in making sense of a whole text.

### Kid watching

What I'm recommending, I suppose, really, is kid watching, but it's kid watching, not just on an individual basis, but looking at how he relates to other kids. And also what goes on at home, in and out of school situations in which literacy plays a part because we may find that actually there may be quite significant literacy events in his home but somehow they are disengaged from what is going on in school.

Underneath these questions, underlying all of this, my concerns would be to do with matters such as: does he show a capacity for independent problem solving in other contexts? I think the Bussis study showed us so convincingly that children approach reading much like they approach other tasks. I think there's something about the necessity for problem solving and the necessity for persistence which may well relate to other situations. But on the other hand, it may be that there are areas in his life where he does actively solve problems, in which case these might be good contexts in which he could engage with the written word.

### What does Stephen think reading is good for?

I suppose ultimately that the question I've been hinting at all along is, to use Margaret Meek Spencer's phrase, What does he think reading is good for? I think this comes up in the work of Gemma Moss, and Judith Soliken, who show us that young children do develop very significant ideas about what literacy can and cannot do for them and how it relates to their social identity and their family. So I'd also like to know the family's pattern of literacy.

And related to this is the notion of what part he sees reading and writing playing in his present and future life. I remember a child who I taught many years ago, George, who had a Schonell Reading age of 5.4 (that was a test commonly used then) at the age of just 7. At the end of the year he had a reading age of 12.5 years – he was a very bright little boy from a Caribbean family. I remember asking him 'How come you never learned to read downstairs?' He said 'What, Miss, with them books downstairs? You're joking Miss.' But at the end of the year he said 'It's good to read.' When I asked him 'Why?'

he said 'Well Miss you might be in the country . . . you might . . . there might be a sign in a field saying "danger" and if you couldn't read you might be in danger.' In a sense this notion of what reading can do is laughably limited – much more limited than the notion of a technically much less proficient reader in the same class as George. This was a boy called Lloyd who came in one day asking me to find him a poem about a cat, saying 'Miss, me cat died and when you read about something, it helps you to sort it out in your mind.' But George's notion was none the less very strongly held – the notion that literacy could keep you safe – so I feel that I would like to know what part Stephen sees literacy playing in his present and future life and in connection with that I'd like to know who his heroes are. Who would he look up to? Superman?

What's the family pattern of literacy? As I've hinted before, he seems a dutiful boy. But I'd want to know what enthuses him so we know what might really engage him. But meanwhile, what can his teacher do?

### What Stephen's teacher might do

Depending on what answers emerge to the questions set out above, what follows may well need to be modified. But it seems that Graham Frater's recent work on effective classrooms, on classrooms 'where boys don't lag behind the girls in literacy, is relevant here. You look at school level to create a positive climate for literacy work and to create a more involving culture of reading. I would suggest that within the class the teacher could work to create a more involving culture of reading. I say more involving; I don't know a great deal about what that teacher does.

There needs to be 'hospitality' to reading material reflecting popular culture. The classroom shouldn't just reflect the community children come from and do no more than this. But there should be hospitality and respect for the culture that the children bring to the school, which means including Disney comics as well as award-winning picture books.

I would suggest more collaborative activities to engage him in a social way; and also story readings that invite active participation – that invite, not just a rehearsal of what's happening, but active engagement regarding what's going to happen and speculation about the attitudes of people involved, this sort of thing.

*Hennetta puts forward the following more specific suggestions of ways in which Stephen's teacher might create a positive climate for his literacy development:*

**Create a more involving 'culture of reading' in the class***She could focus on:*

- displays and collections of comics – for study as well as enjoyable reading;
- author displays;
- league tables of popular books;
- writing frames for reviews, which are then placed in a public place and used by children to guide what they choose to read;
- quizzes on books, perhaps with mini-prizes – this kind of competitive approach is especially good for involving boys;
- involvement in a book club, and it's good to see the books before buying them;
- inviting in an author of some interest to Stephen;
- poetry might well be an avenue in; some studies show that boys can get into reading through poetry.

**Show him what literacy can do***She could:*

- make evident, perhaps through drama, the role literacy plays in some situations (medical? sporting?) and roles which are of real interest to Stephen and others in the class who may be like him; and
- regular teacher demonstration of how reading helps you through the day, in and out of school.

**Engagement in class story-readings***Initially the teacher herself could do this through:*

- choosing herself texts she thinks might be of interest;
- developing an interactive approach to reading aloud, in which the children, particularly Stephen, are encouraged to speculate about the events etc.; and
- setting up role play activities related to the text.

**Motivating Stephen and enhancing his reading strategies***His teacher could:*

- introduce him to texts that he will want to read again and again, because of their themes and their language, from jokes and comic rhymes to haunting stories;
- engage him in purposeful information reading on a topic of real pressing interest, with a public outcome (e.g. a visual display of different types of fish and the most effective ways of catching them, a multimedia presentation on the history of the local football team);

- tackle his fluency problems and help him develop the 'tune' of the text through making available taped readings of texts for use with headphones, to accompany his own reading of interesting texts at a level of difficulty just beyond those he is comfortable with;
  - engage him in Literacy Circle work, where a portion of the text is read before the session, and the group time is used to discuss responses to the text;
  - involve him in big book or 'guided' reading in a way that invites and encourages independent problem solving – in terms both of how the text will go and of word identification;
  - in individual reading, get him to focus on what might happen in a story and to act 'like a detective' in finding out if he is right;
  - encourage him to use context cues through:
    - re-reading the previous phrase/s with an expectant intonation;
    - asking him to leave the word out and go back to it at the end of the sentence;
    - encouraging him to reflect on relevant aspects of the text thus far;
  - help him to tackle more unknown words independently, through being tuned in to their morphemic and phonic patterning, perhaps through:
    - pointing out morphemic units (e.g. the 'ed' on 'wanted', the 'one' in 'anyone');
    - pointing out families of words sharing rime patterns (e.g. 's/ound', 'f/ound' etc., 'sh/out', 't/out' etc.);
    - pointing out larger phonic patterns (e.g. 'scribble', 'wobble' etc.);
    - getting him to attend to key letters of misread 'known' words (e.g. 'she', 'it', 'the' etc.) through pointing to them silently.
- Displays of 'word families', referred to at relevant points might help here.
- when she judges that the time is right, the teacher might help him into Harry Potter, perhaps through:
    - a collaborative Harry Potter display, made with all the children;
    - a role play exercise, with some key props;
    - reading part of one of the earlier books;
    - making available taped reading of subsequent short extracts for use with headphones to accompany his own reading of the text;
  - invite one or both of his parents to work with her in school, to help them see and experience a meaning-focused approach to reading.

**The reading theory underpinning these suggestions**

- the power of home learning and how it can be harnessed (Hannon 1995);
- that different communities have different uses for literacy and different sets of social practices involving literacy (Heath 1983);

- that all young children have ideas about what are the uses of literacy and how it relates to their current and future identities (Solsken 1993);
- that fluent reading is not a bottom-up, synthetic process in which we first recognize letters, then build them into words, but a highly complex process involving many kinds of knowledge in the initial perception of words (Cattell 1886; Clay 1972; Rumelhart 1976; Goodman and Goodman 1977);
- that children use fundamentally different processes to recognize words as they make progress in learning to read (Bussis *et al.* 1985; Frith 1985);
- that analogy is a powerful learning strategy for young children generally, and in particular for their learning of phonics (Goswami 1992);
- that powerful reading lessons can only be taught through powerful texts (Meek 1988);
- the importance of reflection and metacognition in children's literacy learning (Clay 1972);
- that brief teacher-child interactions, where the teacher acts as 'consciousness for two', can significantly advance children's learning (Geekie *et al.* 1999);
- the importance of social learning in large and small groups (King and Robinson 1995);
- that effective teachers of literacy have developed a coherent philosophy towards it, involving substantial attention to meaning (Poulson *et al.* 1997; Medwell *et al.* 1998).

## MARY HILTON'S OBSERVATIONS, SUGGESTIONS AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

### Brief profile of Mary Hilton

Mary Hilton is a university lecturer in Primary English in the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. She has written and researched on a range of aspects of children's learning in literature and literacy. She has edited *Potent Fictions: Children's Literacy and the Challenge of Popular Culture* (1996) and, together with Morag Styles and Victor Watson, *Opening the Nursery Door: Reading, Writing and Childhood 1600–1900* (1997). Alongside her interests in literature for children, media education and community practices, she has recently focused her research on the history of education. She has edited, together with Pam Hirsch, *Practical Visionaries: Women, Education and Social Progress 1790–1930* (2000). Mary is currently working on a book which explores the writings of leading women educators in the century 1750–1850.

Mary Hilton participated in the symposium on this theme at the United Kingdom Reading Association's annual conference in Oxford 2000. What follows is an edited transcript of an interview I conducted with her in January 2002.

KATHY HALL (KH): *What do we know about Stephen as a reader?*

MARY HILTON (MH): I only know him from the video and miscue so my knowledge is quite limited but he did seem to be typical – he seemed to be a boy with reading problems and they didn't seem to be unusual ones.

In fact I thought he was typical of a lot of children of that age so I thought the exercise was really interesting in that way.

I also thought things were revealed from the video about his interactions with books which helped me come to certain conclusions.

I didn't think that the books that were on offer were particularly related to him as a reader. In a nominal way he was given a choice – he picked one but I think his teacher said 'You don't have to take that one'. He then just picked up the next one, he was anxious about that, he wasn't really choosing. She asked him why he chose it and he didn't really know why, he said he thought he might like some of the pictures. So the kind of processes of choice were pretty narrow and artificial really. I think he's failing at some level.

I thought what he was actually doing was going through the motions of reading to his teacher without any real commitment, autonomy or any of those things that might take him forward. In terms of the miscue he could read off certain words at a literal level, but the kind of inferential structures of the text, he wasn't really engaging with those at any level. Can I bring my research to bear on this?

KH: *I'd be delighted if you would.*

MH: Well, I've done quite a lot of examination of the national reading tests. One of the first bits of evidence was the government-commissioned study of 45 schools in inner London – the present government drew lots of erroneous conclusions based on this rather facile report – but what the report did seem to show was that large numbers of children do learn to read at a very basic level. They called it 'reading age of 8' in that Report, and this would seem to have been backed up subsequently by the national curriculum testing. That is that we can teach almost all children to read up to the level that Stephen was almost operating at. Let's say a reading age of about 8. He was learning to read the words on the page but what he wasn't able to do was to understand the text at a deeper level, and understand inference, deduction, pleasure, prediction and all that kind of thing. He just wasn't operating at that kind of level and it didn't look like he was going to get there. We now know that huge numbers of children do pass through the school system without ever doing any more than read at a very basic level. So I think he's a really interesting case study because of his sheer typicality – we now know statistically that he is one of many.

KH: *Thanks for that Mary. What would you like to know about him as a reader?*

MH: I would like to know a lot more about him than the evidence from the video and miscue. I would like to know what he reads – and I'm taking reading in a very broad sense. I would like to know what he reads for

pleasure, and if that's video text. Does he play computer games? Does he watch videos? What other texts does he approach? What does he genuinely choose for himself? What are his real likes and dislikes? This might take a lot of working with him to determine that, and indeed watching him and talking to his parents.

I would like to know a lot more socio-cultural information. I would like to know who he plays with, what the reading practices at home are, who reads what and who gets pleasure from what, what the kind of literacy practices are, who writes what and so on – information that could be gleaned from his parents, possibly not. I'd like to have a much wider frame than the evidence of him performing on a miscue or a taped thing like that. I'd like to know what he writes too. I'd like to see examples of his writing, right from the early stages, and to see developmentally how he's going along with writing.

I'd really like to know from him as well what he thinks it means to read, what he sees reading is for, if you like, and what he understands about the nature of reading. And I'd like to know how that's contextualized within the culture of home and the community. And so I'd also like to know what his friends get up to, what they read, and what they talk about as I just don't see how you can move him onwards with reading in any way without having a lot of that information to hand. You can then get him stimulated and I think that's what I was very worried about when I watched the video. I've called it a pathology of school. What was happening was that there seemed to be a school-level definition of reading that he was attempting to come up to but it wasn't a real level, no personal autonomy involved in any sense. His own sense of his personhood if you like wasn't there and my worry is there will come a widening gap between those two things – school literacy and a literacy that is personally meaningful to him.

KH: *Many thanks for that Mary. What do you think his teacher should do to advance him as a reader?*

MH: I think there were a lot of things his teacher could do. It sounds a bit bossy but I think she does need to review her whole classroom practice. I think she is caught into a paradigm that she would need to break out of which involves certain kinds of rather rigid definitions of what reading is. I think she's got to have a wider and more imaginative classroom literacy practice. She needs to bring in more texts that those children, who are failing, are interested in. I think she needs to introduce more media and more popular culture into her work – so that's taking a wide-angle look. In more detail, she needs to talk in depth to his parents about his reading habits – when he does read, who to, what he reads, through to how the family view reading so she can work her practice in more culturally sympathetic kinds of ways.

Then there are also important facets to getting him to write as well as to read, so getting him to write about things that gave him pleasure, getting him to re-engage with the processes of literacy along pleasurable lines. It seemed as if he was doing it for her, and probably because his parents were anxious; it wasn't engaging for him though. I think she needs to work very hard at re-engaging his interests, and his imagination, through following his interests. She needs to bring to the classroom those kinds of texts that interest him. She needs to engage him in ways that he finds meaningful. That might well mean making overheads for a little media production or writing texts for his friends, or setting down to write a fantasy story that he really can deeply engage with through play and through his imagination. And so I think there are quite a lot of things she could do.

I'm sorry to go on at quite a general level as I'm not sure what she really does do but those are the kinds of things that I would do.

And my absolute aim would be to get that child hooked on books and I wouldn't really care too much what those books were at this stage; I'd want him to come to literacy as a meaningful activity.

It seems the teacher does have comics in the classroom but clearly that's not quite enough and I don't blame any teacher, particularly inexperienced ones, as they've been trained to disengage with more imaginative approaches to the teaching of reading. I have the impression that his teacher may be of the view that you can train pupils through phonics, exercises, and instruction. Of course you only do learn to read at a very basic level with those kinds of techniques, and if you want children to read at a deeper level, you must bring back in practices which promote autonomy and pleasure. If you want children to understand inference for example, you must do this to engage with texts in an intense and meaningful way.

I've jotted down things like computer games, what stories turned him on, what reading does he do for pleasure, home-school links and all the kinds of changes in classroom practice that that might incur. To re-engage this child with meaningful literate practice is key.

KH: *As you were speaking there I was thinking of the National Literacy Strategy and whether some teachers would find inconsistency between the Literacy Hour and the suggestions you are advancing?*

MH: The whole idea that literacy just happens in an hour is a quite frightening one, an idea we've got to get rid of. Literacy in the primary school happens all the time, and must happen all the time, and somehow this idea that you can stand up and instruct children for an hour and you've done your literacy work is a terrible mistake and will lead to lower standards. I'm engaged in an argument with the government as to whether standards are going up and I don't think they are going up. The teaching profession is caught in a kind of contradictory discourse around these things and I

think it's not doing them any good really, and it's certainly not doing children any good.

One of the problems as I see it centres on this reading age of 8 idea – I do actually think that there is a place for phonics, word recognition games, rhyming games and all the rest of it but this only takes you up, as it were, to around a reading age of 8. There's a kind of cut off at this point, and the government has to become aware that we can teach large numbers of children to do this quite well using the kinds of techniques they are advocating. Indeed if the early stages of reading had been the problem then all these kinds of techniques and initiatives would have been worthwhile, but the point about it is that it wasn't the problem. Even in the 45 schools report it said large numbers of children learn to read up to this point so it's not really a phonics or a word recognition problem. The real problem is inference. Many children are failing to understand what's not there in a text, to read between the lines. Things like that which we call 'higher order' skills. Children are learning all the lower order skills, and teachers have always taught those well, but what's not happening is the development of the higher order skills. And I think that's where media education comes in. Many children are actually learning higher order inferential skills from media texts, from film more than they are from print text, so it does bring back media texts firmly into the Key Stage 2 classroom.

KH: *And into the Key Stage 1 classroom also?*

MH: Yes, as I say, I don't want to get into a paradigm that says all the mechanical things happen when they're younger and all the interesting reading happens when they're older, because that would be very wrong. Clearly you have to talk about how stories are made and how they work, and all that sort of thing from the very beginning. But I think there is some argument that you do need lots more instructional support for a very early reader. It's a symbolic system and you have got to show children how it works. I've never really had any objection to that. What I do object to is the idea that this will carry them into Key Stage 2, when they've mastered the basics. What many primary pupils are failing to do is to understand text, and genre and inference. And they never gain it – they go on to secondary school still reading at a very basic literal level. So to me there is a big problem with reading in Britain and one they ought to address – but it's not the early stages.

KH: *Is Stephen beyond the instructional support level, do you think?*

MH: Yes, I think he is. When you look at his miscues and the things that he can work out, he had some familiar words that he could get right. It



seems to me he had some fairly substantial knowledge of how the symbolic code works. I'm not saying that you would totally remove all that support, but it's dangerous at this level to assume that this is all he needs. He needs a lot more; he needs to see the text as doing much more clever things than merely being literal. And indeed this is the problem that is being shown up by the national tests, that 90 per cent of kids can answer the literal questions but when you ask 'Why was Laura unhappy on the way to the post-box?' and it doesn't actually say it in the text, the numbers actually drop down dramatically – often to lower than 20 per cent, so that they're completely failing with higher order questions and responses. And large numbers of children won't even attempt questions like that. So Stephen is a child who is just at this watershed. He has had a lot of phonic, word-level training; he now needs to see that texts are actually clever, and interesting, and put himself into them.

And on this I'm probably an old-fashioned teacher in some respects, but I would work very much on his writing at this point because I think if he took off as a writer he might begin to have more understanding of what he reads. As a teacher myself I did a lot on writing, and reading was encouraged to support pupils' writing, but that's just me; I liked them to be creative. Close attention to texts was used to spur their imaginations.

KH: *What theoretical perspectives inform all those suggestions?*

MH: I have done two higher degrees with The Open University which I loved very much, and I think as a result of that work – a lot of it was empirical work here on a council estate where I worked – I definitely take a socio-cultural and anthropological view on literacy. My gurus are probably Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street. Heath's work I think is absolutely outstanding. *Ways with Words* is probably the most important text for me. She was the first person that showed how deeply enculturated, even within a general American culture, different communities of readers and writers are. And we all live in that world now where different ethnic communities and classes and genders actually come to reading and writing in deeply enculturated ways. I think the only way you can teach children from all different cultures is, yes, to have a generalized school system but the school needs to have an ear out into the particular community that it serves. Until we do that we're not going to reach the Stephens of this world. Many children are going to have two completely different discourses going on: they're going to have the school's definitions – where they're going to fail before long – and they're going to have home where the reading and writing practices are quite different. Home literacy practices are for different purposes and children come to them in different ways, and until teachers, new teachers, go out into the profession looking outward to the community I don't think we are going to raise standards.

Here I think Stephen is a paradigmatic example of the current failure to appreciate the child's culture.

I feel I'm an anthropologist, a social anthropologist, on literacy itself. I think the work of Street is very interesting as he has worked on breaking down any monocultural idea about what literacy is, and has said it depends on people and what they want to say to each other and the way they take meaning from text. And I think that's absolutely true and it's terribly important with young children to use anthropological concepts in order to get them talking about the kinds of things that frame their everyday lives, their kinship patterns, the family myths and stories, the things that are important to them; this is straight social anthropology really. And I think reading and writing fit into that anthropological pattern, particularly when we are young. Before you are locked into what you might call a generalized intellectual culture of the West, all you know, all you bring to school as a 5-year-old, is your family culture. Teachers need to acquaint themselves with the way that culture works and then I think they would be more effective as teachers. I think I've been fairly consistent all the way through. I think that's what that young teacher ought to do: talk to families, see what reading actually means to them, what they think it's for, how they perceive it and then adjust the classroom practice to that, and to appropriate texts.

Now that doesn't mean that teachers haven't got an agenda for themselves, a perfectly legitimate one. For example, it's our job to introduce children to great literature, powerful fiction and classics, such as Shakespeare, but I think again it's got to be done with a sensitive knowledge of the child's home culture. This knowledge makes you a more sophisticated teacher and a better teacher of literacy. I can't think of anybody else's work I admire as much as Heath's. Sadly the government here thinks teachers were wasting their time by familiarizing themselves with children's culture and it's going to take a long time for that to change.

KH: *Some of the things we're talking about here are probably beyond numerical measurement and in the current climate that is an issue?*

MH: I do think it's quite important to have national literacy tests if they're well constructed. I actually think there should be a national literacy test at 9 and children and schools that are aren't doing very well should be allocated more resources. It shouldn't happen at the end of the primary school phase as it's too late to do anything about it then. I think they should get rid of the tests for 7-year-olds and 11-year-olds, and make a proper test for 9-year-olds, as until we do start to measure we don't really know what's going on. As a progressive teacher I've never been frightened of my pupils' progress being measured. It's very easy to get cornered if you're someone who is defined as progressive and creative, to get labelled as someone who

just 'loves children' and who doesn't really care whether they are doing any better, and I never want to get cornered in that position. I wanted the children in my class to do well and the methods that I'm suggesting are not as easily measured in small units of discrete work but I claim they are important to progress. This progress can, I believe, be carefully assessed and evaluated in a summative way on an annual basis. The government has so far failed to do this satisfactorily. In fact I think the current national curriculum tests are being rigged; I think they're dishonest the way they are changing them at the moment and that is maddening. They have decreased the number of inference questions and increased the number of literal questions in the reading comprehension tests to make them easier since 1998. This has enabled government to claim a rise in standards – not true! But I'd never like to be positioned as someone who doesn't believe in testing at all because I do believe in it. And I think it's very important for progressive teachers to keep that national picture of results in our heads. Even if you can only measure certain very basic things, I still think you need to measure them. It reassures the public at large and gives teachers a sense of progress. What we desperately need are accurate and honest national literacy figures. This is because I believe school is failing large numbers of mainly working-class children and the current situation is not helping – it's making it worse. The kind of rigid practices that student teachers are now seeing in schools is dreadful. And yet it was Britain which a few years ago was leading the way in so many imaginative and progressive educational ways. Media education now, for example, is so marginalized – it has been written out of the curriculum, yet very recently we have found that children who watch films and television are often the best readers and writers. But as a result of this neglect I also think what children do when they produce and react to media texts is under-theorized at the moment. All the same this is a topic that will continue to be important as films are the central cultural texts that children 'read'. Certainly the current climate of English teaching with its narrow 'standards agenda' and the heavy emphasis on linguistic features of texts is self-defeating. We will soon be left behind by more enterprising nations with more sophisticated education systems.

KH: *Thanks very much for agreeing to participate in this project, for studying the video of Stephen and for giving me this interview. Many thanks, Mary, for such a full response to all the questions.*

## READING AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

### What is reading for?

Both Henrietta Dombey and Mary Hilton referred very directly to what Stephen thinks the purpose of reading is. They both asked 'What does he think reading is for?' They were keen to emphasize the significance of reading to Stephen's life, how he himself rated it in his life. Ann Browne and Teresa Grainger also posed this question directly; all the scholars did in some way, and as we shall see later, our final two participants similarly emphasized this in their responses to the evidence. The question 'What is reading for?' raises a host of other issues about reading that we have not addressed so far in the book. It raises other questions about what we mean by reading, and about its links with writing and other language modes. We are beginning to get a sense of a broader notion of reading and of literacy now and in a way that raises issues about learning more generally. The question 'What is reading for?' raises a crucial question about context and how people are enculturated into what is called 'communities of practice'. It is opportune to consider in more detail some of the themes highlighted by the two scholars whose transcripts feature in this Part. First I will discuss the notion of communities of practice and identify the implications of this for what we mean by a socio-cultural notion of literacy. Recent developments of Vygotskian thinking will be used to do this, especially Bruner's theory of cultural psychology because I think these perspectives get at the heart of a socio-cultural interpretation of what it is to become a (better) reader. The significance of home and school literacies will get special attention and

some ground-breaking research admired by our scholars about the meaning and role of context in literacy learning will be explained. Throughout, I will exemplify these perspectives with reference to practice and to a rationale for a socio-cultural perspective at the level of the classroom. You will be directed back to our participants' suggestions frequently. Finally, this part of the book will discuss the fit between the ideas presented here and the model of literacy learning currently endorsed by official policy in England.

### **Communities of practice: literacy is about ways of being in the world**

In Parts One and Two we became familiar with various definitions of, or assumptions about, literacy. We encountered Goodman's notion of reading as psycho-linguistic guessing game while the cognitive-psychological school implied that reading is a cognitive skill and that it is the ability to decode and comprehend written language. Highlighted in both these accounts is a notion of the individual possessing or lacking certain knowledge and skills about reading. What the psycho-linguistic and cognitive-psychological schools have in common is an exclusive focus on the child-as-individual, on pedagogy, and on school literacy. Both perspectives emphasize the individual nature of the construction of meaning: the individual is seen as the centre of all thought. Both perspectives also prioritize the primacy of mind over social or contextual dimensions, and cognitive-psychology, in particular, treats culture as merely a variable that influences how meaning is made. The socio-cultural perspective, exemplified in the writings of Luis Moll (2000), sees culture as a set of practices such that the study of culture is the study of the way people live culturally – rather than the study of static cultural traits. This section explains this point.

In presenting the ideas of the four scholars who featured in Parts One and Two of the book, I chose to single out particular aspects of reading for detailed discussion (e.g. response to literature, phonemic awareness etc.). As I have said several times now, some of these same scholars also subscribe to the perspectives discussed here in Part Three. On the other hand, the thinking of both Henrietta Dombey and Mary Hilton is explicitly informed by the ideas of this part, hence their inclusion at this point.

A socio-cultural perspective on reading shifts the emphasis from the individual *per se* to the social and cultural context in which literacy occurs. We shift our perspective now from personal skill to cultural practice or towards the study of the social group and its history. This means that the social dimensions of learning are brought to the fore. It means that literacy is discussed in relation to culture, to context and to authentic activity. And it means that culture is treated, not merely as a variable contributing to

meaning-construction, but as *the* key to meaning making. Several sections will focus directly on the classroom practices associated with this line of thinking.

The socio-cultural perspective, sometimes described as socio-constructivism, stresses the symbolic nature of knowledge and thought – it implies that knowledge is based on agreed-upon beliefs about the world, based in turn on human beings' interactions within that world (Hiebert and Raphael 1998). Meaning emerges from social interactions. These ideas originated in the writings of the Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1978) but have been taken up and developed by several others (e.g. Bruner 1996 and Lee and Smagorinsky 2000) over recent decades. Vygotsky talks about socio-constructivism and Bruner describes his theory as cultural psychology. Vygotsky's followers don't necessarily always agree on all the finer points but I'm not concerned with those details here (for some debates see Lee and Smagorinsky 2000). I'm more interested in the overarching perspective itself. For convenience, but especially because I think his development of Vygotskian thinking over recent decades is especially insightful and brimming with implications for the promotion of literacy, I take Bruner's research as my main theoretical base for the moment.

### **Bruner's cultural psychology**

Culture itself is about the way we make meanings, the way we assign meanings to things in different settings in particular situations. Culture is an outcome of people's histories, experiences and efforts and it also shapes those histories, experiences and efforts. A socio-cultural position on reading draws attention to how readers' negotiation of meaning is bound up with the context in which reading occurs. In this perspective the mind is seen, not as a computational device, but as something more subtle, as something constituted by culture, shaped by culture. Bruner says mind could not exist without culture (1996: 2). He makes the point that although meanings are in the mind, meanings originate in the culture in which they are created.

This is a crucial idea for its major implication, from the point of view of this perspective on reading, is that learning and thinking are always situated, always in a context, and always dependent on the use of person-made tools or resources. And the tool of all person-made tools is surely language. Language is the primary symbol system that allows us to shape meaning – it gives our thoughts shape and expression, yet it also shapes our very thoughts in the process. As literacy educators we are hugely interested in improving our learners' human capacity to use that symbol system. But we must recognize that symbol system as constructed historically and culturally. People, tools, and culturally created ways of using tools are inseparable.

This leads to the important conclusion that learning is inherently social, even when others are not physically present. Even reading a book alone involves the reader in a written code developed through long periods of use by other people and of course what the reader brings to the book has been influenced by the thinking of others and the previous social contexts in which the reader has been (Au 1997, Lee and Smagorinsky 2000). That learning literacy is social and cultural is inescapable.

Bruner makes the important point that while nothing is culture-free, neither are individuals mere reflections of their culture. The interaction between the individual and the culture gives rise to human thought having 'a communal cast' on the one hand and having an 'unpredictable richness' on the other (Bruner 1996: 14). This gives rise to subjectivity – one's personal take on a situation or event – which in turn gives rise to the need to negotiate, share and communicate our meanings to others in the community. But as he observes, humans have a sophisticated gift for coming to know the minds of others in their community – he calls this intersubjectivity – whether through language or other signs like gestures. He says 'It is not just words that make this [intersubjectivity] possible, but our capacity to grasp the role of settings in which words, acts, and gestures occur. We are the inter-subjective species par excellence. It is this that permits us to negotiate meanings when words go astray' (Bruner 1996: 20).

So children, Bruner argues, are especially good at tuning in to what he calls the 'folkways' they see around them. They are predisposed to assimilate the practices and activities of their parents and peers around them in their community. They appear to be willing apprentices to their more adept peers. On the other hand, adults, and arguably any knowledgeable people in the culture, appear to have a disposition to demonstrate performance for the benefit of the novice. They appear to be willing mentors. Knowledgeable members of the culture assist others in learning. The notion of apprenticeship becomes important. It flags the learner as active, not passive, in a community of people who support, challenge, and guide development.

On the grounds that children are active learners, Bruner suggests that teachers have to be interested in determining what learners think they are doing and their reasons for doing it. He also says '... a cultural approach emphasises that the child only gradually comes to appreciate that she is acting not directly on the world but on beliefs about that world' (Bruner 1996: 49). The first premise of his culturalist approach is that 'education is not an island, but part of the continent of culture. It asks what function does education serve in the culture and what role does it play in the lives of those who operate within it?' (Bruner 1996: 11). As I see it this gets at the essence of our scholars' question, 'What does Stephen think reading is for?' What beliefs about literacy is he acting on? What role does reading play in his life? Henrietta and Mary wanted to understand this and both wanted lots more evidence about Stephen in this regard.

### Significant others and multiliteracies

Where is all this getting us in terms of reading development and the teaching of reading? It's getting us towards an appreciation that reading, including learning to read, cannot be separated from the context in which it happens, which includes why it happens, and how it is valued by significant others in the culture. Learning to read is concerned with how reading is done. One's experience of reading is first of other people reading – it is in experiencing other people's reading, and in experiencing one's own attempts in certain structured settings (like school) that one learns what counts as reading. Henrietta Dombey and Mary Hilton wanted to know much more about the wider literacy contexts Stephen experienced and gravitated towards, including collaboration with peers and parents about all kinds of texts, especially popular media.

As socio-linguists put it, becoming literate involves learning a specific discourse, that is it involves learning particular ways of thinking, acting and valuing (Michaels and O'Connor, cited in Hiebert and Raphael 1998). Reading, like any social activity, involves a set of cultural practices that are embedded within webs of relationships. Henrietta and Mary both wanted to know about Stephen's web of relationships around texts. This is a stance that sees the learner as a thinker, as knowledgeable, and as having agency. A stance that sees learning to be a better reader as social as well as cognitive; that it involves motivational and emotional dimensions as well as intellectual and academic ones.

It also sees the classroom itself as a context and a culture in its own right – that is that it has its own system of socially made beliefs, values and ways of doing things and that these in turn guide people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Au 1997). The classroom or school or home or community is a community of practice with, say in the case of literacy, its own ways of being literate and demonstrating literacy.

It is important to understand incidentally that the idea of community in this context does not refer to harmonious living. Rather it refers to a shared set of social practices and goals, to the patterns and habits of behaviour and thinking on the part of groups of people – it refers to ways of being in the world. Some call this 'discourse' (e.g. Gee 1999a). Different groups or communities of course may have different patterns, habits and ways of dealing with the world; for example they may have different literacy practices, different discourses – there are different communities of practice. Importantly, a single individual is likely to be a member of several different communities of practice.

It logically follows from the above that there are many literacies, just as there are many communities of practice. To exemplify, with some diverse examples. Learning to read the Koran involves rote memorization and people are not usually expected to decode the written passages or interpret

what they say – the latter being the job of the 'learned scholars'. The religious purpose of prayer does not necessitate comprehension. Literacy is used in a specific way here and the context promotes particular skills (Rassool 1999). On the other hand graffiti artists operating in the underground or the subway are expected to devise their own trademark logos. A third example pertains to information technology. Over the past twenty years or so technology has allowed us to communicate across time and space and to link a wide range of textual information into our communications – visual, audio, and behavioural. All of this gives rise to the notion of multiliteracies (Cope and Kalantzis 2000, Kress 2000a, 2000b). So being literate depends on the context of interaction, and depends, not so much on being right, as about knowing the rules and conventions of the particular discourse or language register.

The upshot of this line of thinking for reading is that its study has shifted from psychology, especially experimental psychology and the ways of the 'hard' sciences, to having a greater involvement with disciplines that are about the way people behave in groups, like sociology, anthropology, and socio-linguistics. Literacy is now a multidisciplinary field. One way that researchers have sought to explore literacy learning in this perspective is through ethnographic studies of situated literacies, of literacies in the context of their occurrence. Researchers have used open-ended styles of interviewing and observation over very long periods (often years) to try to understand literacy from the perspectives of those inside a particular community or culture. And reports of such work are quite different to the style of reporting used by, say, cognitive psychologists. Some researchers working in the field of education have presented their findings in the form of individual learning biographies of the children studied (e.g. Bussis *et al.* 1985, Soisken 1993, Hicks 2001).

One message of this line of enquiry is that understanding the nature of literacy interactions and practices in the home is critical for maximizing literacy learning opportunities in school. When the ordinary events of the home and print in the environment are integrated into school contexts or, put another way, when there is continuity between school and out-of-school literacy, meaningful participation in literacy is greatly enriched for learners. The lesson we need to learn from this is that when the literacies of the community, home and school are viewed as complementary, when these literacies are used to build on one another, connections are made for pupils. In practice this may mean that the literacies of the home be adapted to become more school-like as children come closer to school entry. In this way transition to the new community of school literacy practice becomes smoother. By the same token, school literacy may need to approximate more closely the literacy practices of the home (Cole 1990, Hiebert and Raphael 1998). As Cole (1990) suggests, the problems that some children encounter in schools lie not so much in the acquisition of cognitive skills,

but in becoming accustomed to the specific tasks and activities required by the school. In the case of becoming a better reader than the issue is not just a matter of acquiring skills (like decoding) but coming to know how to be like a reader in the context of the literacy demands of the school. In the next section we will look more closely at this theme in relation to home and school literacies.

If you see literacy as social practice, then you are likely to see literacy teaching as apprenticing children into the discourses and social practices of literate communities. It is important to consider our frameworks and this is what this book is all about. The scholars whose transcripts are included in this and the next part of this book look beyond texts to what people do with literacy and to how, when and where they do it. They are interested in different uses of literacy in different contexts, from print to visual literacy, and from computer to oral ways of communicating. Literacy is what literacy does. Literacy can only be understood from knowledge of the conditions under which it occurs. Mary Hilgón and Henrietta Dombey are interested in informal learning and everyday, home practices, as well as school practices. They go beyond classrooms and pedagogical methods. Above all, they see home, school and community as complementary sites of literacy learning.

Below I will describe some examples that seek to align home and school literacies. I will outline a school literacy programme as an example of a curriculum devised along socio-cultural principles. But first I will refer to school literacies and the potential variation across the experiences of different groups.

### Definitions of literacy: school literacies

In a recent issue of the *Journal of Research in Reading*, devoted to socio-cultural perspectives on literacy, Freebody and Freberg (2001) claim that school literacies have dominated the field to the extent that they have come to determine what is recognized as reading and writing, not just in schools but in homes as well. School literacies, they argue, act like 'evaluative filters' defining certain practices as 'adequate', 'appropriate', 'effective', 'efficient', 'warranted'. The result is that for many people school literacies define reading as 'a portable capability' (Freebody and Freberg 2001: 223) rather than something which is distributed or shared among groups for different purposes. They also argue that school literacies set limits on what can be taken to mean effective reading. Other writers argue along similar lines. For instance, Kathy Au's work in the United States (1980) and Eve Gregory's work in this country (Gregory 1998 and Gregory and Williams 2000) shows that literacy practices outside school often require pupils to use skills and strategies more complex than those required in school. Bilingual children,

for example, frequently translate for their parents whose first language is not English. Allan and Carmen Luke (2001) talk about the complex skills required to navigate the world wide web or play video games – skills that are not part of the formal school curriculum and that most adults lack. As Ann Haas Dwyson (2000) reminds us, many children are now forming a social childhood that we adults have not experienced and they are in need of a language to talk about that world.

Freebody and Freiberg criticize those taking a cognitive-psychological stance (like Adams; Burns *et al.*; NRP) on the grounds that they make prescriptive statements about preferable literacies rather than basing research on actual reading practices in homes and in schools. In other words, in relation to school literacy, a normative version of how teachers should act is presented as a research-based, accurate description of how teachers do act.

### Different classroom literacies for different pupils?

Some brief examples of socio-cultural studies of literacy demonstrate how even within the same classroom different literacies are experienced. First, one from this country, then three from the US to demonstrate this point.

Henrietta Dombey referred to Gemma Moss's work in the context of Stephen's orientation to reading. Moss's case study of school reading practice showed how 'boys and girls gender reading for themselves . . . and how reading is gendered for them through their interactions' (Moss and Attar 1999: 133) with others. Proficiency in reading was deemed important in the classes observed and pupils themselves were as aware of where they and their peers were on the 'proficiency ladder' as were the teachers. Children who were 'free readers' or who could read independently could select whatever books they liked from the class library but those who were not so defined could not, being confined instead to the reading scheme. Girls, the observational evidence of their behaviour showed, were much more willing to go along with their teachers' judgements of them than were boys. Boys resisted teacher definitions of their proficiency. They typically sought ways of avoiding having their proficiency labelled. They sometimes refused to read the book allotted to them on the grounds that it was babyish or they argued that the books from which they could select were all boring and dull.

Hennetta's own account in interview of 'George' fits this kind of scenario. Moss and Attar concluded that low proficiency rankings seem to cause boys more problems. What their study and those of others begin to highlight is that the conditions for underachievement are at least partially created by the actual reading curriculum within the classroom.

Over twenty years ago Allington (1980, 1983) analysed how teachers in twenty primary, ethnically and socio-economically mixed, classrooms in New York responded to children's oral reading errors. In most of the

classrooms studied those in the top and bottom reading groups varied along social class and ethnic lines. He found dramatic interactional differences according to ability group. Teachers were more likely to correct errors that poor readers made and to correct them more rapidly at the point of error. There were also differences in the prompts offered, with poor readers being more likely to be given graphophonic cues and good readers being more likely to be offered semantic/syntactic cues.

In similar vein, a study by McDermott and Gospodinoff (1981) compared the lessons on offer to three different ability groups in an early years classroom. Striking differences were found between the top and bottom groups. The researchers described how the attention of the members of the top group and their teacher was on the text – they called this positioning 'looking at the book'. In the bottom group, attention of the pupils and the teacher wandered and much time was spent on positionings described as 'getting a turn to read' and 'waiting for the teacher'. This happened because the teacher frequently did other things while teaching this group; she was frequently interrupted by children outside the group and attended to their needs. And this happened because children outside the group knew they could get the teacher's attention while she worked with the bottom group, but not when she worked with the top group. As a result, of course, the bottom group got less teaching and attention than the top group – the researchers described this situation as a case of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. The researchers also noted that the children in the top group were of middle-class, mainstream backgrounds while those in the bottom group were mainly of diverse cultural backgrounds. They pointed out that the interactions negotiated by the children and their teacher during reading lessons reflected the school's function as a sorting mechanism for the broader society, dividing each generation into 'haves' and 'have nots'. In their analysis the teacher and the children unwittingly collaborated in this process.

Much more recently Duke (2000) confirmed this line of thinking through an analysis of quantitative data in US schools. Her evidence led her to conclude that socio-economic differences in both print environments and print experiences 'run wide and deep' (Duke 2000: 470). Although she found that there were fewer books and magazines available to pupils in low socio-economic-status classrooms, there were other differences that could not be explained with reference to resources. For example, there were significant differences in the opportunities to write for audiences beyond the teacher, favouring high-SES groups. She concluded that school may contribute to relatively lower levels of literacy achievement among low-SES children. She suggests that the widening gaps in literacy achievement between low- and high-SES children in the middle of elementary schooling may be explained with reference to the way schools themselves offer relatively poorer print experiences to low-SES children.



These examples demonstrate two important things: first, that schooling and more specifically pedagogy is implicated in the creation of privilege and disadvantage, and second, that, as Bruner (1996: 63) reminds us, 'pedagogy is never innocent. It is a medium that carries its own message.'

According to socio-cultural theory, one way to stop this happening is to ensure the starting point of reading is meaning and interpreting the world rather than going straight for decoding and reading aloud. This is not to deny the importance of basic skills, but simply to recognize that skills are always part of activities and settings and that they take on meanings in terms of how they are organized. Kathy Au's work, described below, provides an example of such a literacy programme in practice.

### Ways with words

Before considering Au's curriculum it is worth demonstrating why we should link home and school literacies. A brief account of the groundbreaking work of Shirley Brice Heath, who was mentioned by several of interviewees as having influenced their thinking is relevant here.

Heath spent over a decade studying the interactional patterns and 'ways with words' (Heath 1983) used by two working-class communities in the south eastern part of the United States. Roadville was a white, rural, hard-working community with a strong tradition of church life. Trackton was a Black, Afro-American community with a strong oral and literate tradition. Children here had lower levels of educational achievement than their peers in Roadville. Parents at Trackton were optimistic about the role of school in their children's lives while Roadville too wanted the best for their children educationally. In Roadville, babies were immersed in communication and talk was modified to enable understanding and communication. Their early utterances were acknowledged directly. Adult ways of naming and defining the world were paramount – for instance children were not allowed to tell stories unless they were true; adults intervened a great deal in children's language with lots of correcting and encouragement to 'say it right'. In Trackton the expectation was that children would acquire language through exposure, through observation of what was going on around them, not through direct verbal interaction. Children were not incorporated into adult conversation until they were 'old enough' to become active participants. On the other hand children here were expected to give public performances to peers and sometimes elders – in the form of songs, stories and rhymes. The use of language was highly contextual: verbal cues and gestures were important and people had, therefore, to intuit motivations and intentions on the part of others. Referring to the different discourse patterns in both these communities, Heath concluded that '... the different ways children learned to use language were dependent on the ways in

which each community structured their families, defined the roles that community members could assume, and played out their concepts of childhood that guided child socialisation' (Heath 1983: 11).

The question Heath poses in relation to this evidence is: what will children from each community be looking for in terms of feedback in school? Clearly Roadville children will expect adult intervention to correct and reward right answers while children from Trackton will expect their teachers to offer highly contextualized, non-verbal as well as verbal cues of adult approval and disapproval. What her evidence makes clear is that all communities do not rely on the same set of language socializing procedures – procedures like expanding children's utterances, using leading questions, or using simplified language. Her research signals the dangers of assuming universal, 'natural', cross-cultural language learning conditions in communities. Understanding the nature of literacy interactions in the home is critical for the design of literacy contexts in schools. This becomes especially significant in the case of those children who come from non-mainstream cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Mary Hilton's advice that teachers should go out into the community to become aware of out-of-school literacy practices is offered in the context of this kind of evidence. Teachers are clearly in a better position to support literacy in their classrooms if they recognize and build on their pupils' use of literacy patterns in their homes and communities.

But what exactly is being asked of teachers here? The socio-cultural perspective asks teachers to use information or insights gained in one context (the home or the community) to inform the activities and routines in the classroom. Teachers are being asked to create a different kind of classroom dynamic in which these activities would make a difference to pupils' learning. It would be naïve to believe that this is a simple matter. Proponents, practitioners and researchers of this approach (e.g. Moll 2000) acknowledge the challenge involved in doing this and it seems teachers need to be well supported through study groups involving themselves and teacher educators. It is in this context that scholars such as Florio-Ruane have argued that until teachers (usually white, female and middle-class) can understand personally the role of culture in their own lives as literacy learners, they will struggle to understand it in the learning of their pupils. At another level, Janet Maybin (1999) points out that the appropriation by the school of typically out-of-school texts or activities runs the risk of removing the very meanings and functions that gave them their power and attraction in the first place. This is so because, as we have been pointing out, literacy activity is made meaningful to such a large extent through the ways in which it is intertwined with particular situated practices and relationships. Maybin advises that out-of-school activities require very skilful recontextualization to become effective resources for learning.

This section can no more than illustrate some of the ideas that others have sought to implement in their particular settings – it cannot prescribe or mandate the pedagogical details since these will depend on the specific contexts of each classroom and school.

### Funds of knowledge and culturally responsive literacy: an example

One of the most powerful notions emerging from the socio-cultural perspective on literacy is Moll's notion of 'funds of knowledge'. I think this idea is not unlike Mary Hilton's notion of 'culturally sympathetic kinds of ways' or Kathy Au's 'culturally sensitive' approach (Au *et al.* 1997). Moll (2000: 260) suggests that teachers create what he calls 'household analogs' where the aim is not so much to reproduce the household in the classroom but 'to recreate strategically those aspects of household life (e.g. social networks, funds of knowledge) that may lead to productive academic activities in the classroom'. What he calls 'funds of knowledge' are the bodies of knowledge that underlie household activities. In documenting and using them in classroom activities Moll seeks to make obvious the wealth of resources available within any single household or local community – resources that may not be so obvious to teachers or even pupils themselves.

So instead of attending to a community's deficits, attention shifts to the possibilities represented in the 'funds of knowledge'. Many of the teachers Moll has worked with do not live or initially know people within the communities in which they teach. He suggests that such teachers are often the most prone to holding normative notions about, say, the working-class school's community. They are frequently the most likely to assume that parents and pupils don't care about education. As they become more involved in the community their ideas change. The work of Moll and his teacher colleagues sets out to develop 'intentional educational communities ... grounded in social relationships with families, and intentionally defined by the knowledge and resources found in local households' (Moll 2000: 264). A sample of this knowledge from Moll is offered in the following table.

Moll prefers the concept of 'funds of knowledge' to the term 'culture' or 'culture-sensitive curriculum' on the grounds that the latter in his view overly relies on storytelling, dance, arts and crafts, what he calls 'folkloric displays' (Moll 2000: 261). He says:

Although the term 'funds of knowledge' is not meant to replace the anthropological concept of culture, it is more precise for our purposes because of its emphasis on strategic knowledge and related activities essential in household functioning, development, and well-being. It is the specific funds of knowledge pertaining to the social, economic,

Table 4 Examples of household funds of knowledge

<i>Agriculture</i>	<i>Economics</i>
Ranching and farming	Renting and selling
Gardening	Loans
Hunting, tracking, dressing	Accounting
Animal husbandry	Trade/finance
<i>Construction</i>	<i>Repair</i>
Labour laws/construction codes	Automobiles
Carpentry	Airplanes
Roofing	Household appliances
Masonry	Tractors
Design and architecture	Fences
<i>Arts</i>	<i>Religion</i>
Music	Bible studies
Lyrics	Catechism
Painting	Sunday school
Sculpture	Liturgy

Source: Moll (2000)

and productive activities of people in a local region, not 'culture' in its broader anthropological sense, that we seek to incorporate strategically into classrooms.

(Moll 2000: 262–3)

Among the people who set about bridging the gap between school and community literacies, drawing on Vygotskian theory and on Moll's notion of 'funds of knowledge', was Kathy Au who since 1989 has researched the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP) in Hawaii. Despite its proven success (e.g. Tharp 1982), this work is not so well known in this country. I will present an account of some of the aspects of it here to illustrate a socio-cultural stance on literacy that is relevant to English education. However, space prevents a comprehensive account (but see Au 1980, 1992, 1993, 1997).

The project is targeted at pupils of native Hawaiian ancestry attending elementary schools in low-income communities throughout Hawaii. The purpose of it is to help native Hawaiians achieve high levels of literacy in school. Making up almost one-fifth of the state's population, these pupils tend to underachieve in English literacy as indicated by standardized tests, compared to other ethnic groups. Their first language is Hawaii Creole English (HCE) which is a non-mainstream version of English and which tends to be viewed generally as a form of broken English and not a language in its own right. Standard American English is the language of power in the state. As Au (1997) observes, the situation of native Hawaiians mirrors



that of other diverse cultural groups in the US who have subordinate status with respect to the mainstream American culture. Au suggests that because the school tends to reflect the ways of the dominant, mainstream culture, it should not be surprising that the pattern of academic achievement is as it is. In recent years in England a considerable body of evidence has accumulated which similarly demonstrates the underachievement of ethnic minority groups (e.g. Gillborn and Gipps 1996; Gillborn and Youdell 2000).

The principles on which the project is based are as relevant in this country as they are in the States. These are:

- 1 that ownership of literacy (i.e. that pupils value literacy and are willing to make it a part of their everyday lives) as well as the acquisition of meaning-making strategies and skills of literacy are important; and
- 2 that higher levels of literacy follow if literacy teaching happens in a culturally responsive manner.

In justifying the first of these Au claims that people who experience ownership of literacy in school get the immediate rewards of schooling. The immediate, as opposed to the delayed, rewards of schooling are especially important for pupils from non-mainstream backgrounds since their families may not typically show connections among schooling, jobs and general life chances. As we have seen above, a socio-cultural perspective on literacy does not separate intellectual from emotional aspects. The status attributed here to ownership is in line with socio-cultural theory in taking account of the relationship between motivation for schooling and family and community background.

While the overall curriculum goal is ownership, the project focuses on five aspects of literacy, namely the writing process (writers' workshop), reading comprehension (readers' workshop), language and vocabulary knowledge, word reading/spelling strategies, and voluntary reading. The writing process includes the range of activities associated with writing: planning, drafting, revising, and publishing, and pupils engage in all these aspects in the 'writers' workshop' (Graves 1983). Mini-lessons on the various aspects of writing are provided but such lessons occur in the context of drafting and revising self-chosen topics. A socio-cultural perspective on literacy is highly consistent with explicit instruction. Pupils also help each other and they come together as a community of learners to share their writing in discussion groups and conferences.

Reading comprehension involves the ability to interpret text, respond to literature, and link what is read to one's own life. The teacher's role is considered crucial in supporting pupils' reading development – the emphasis being on the Vygotskian notion of moving gradually from assisted to independent performance. A key feature of the reading workshop is the coming together of small groups of pupils to participate in teacher-led, and, in the case of older pupils, also pupil-led, literature discussions. Language

knowledge is about learning and using appropriate language terminology and structures. Word reading strategies covers all the cueing systems, and voluntary reading refers to pupils' willingness to read books independently. Achievement in literacy is assessed in a variety of ways through continuous teacher assessment using conferences, portfolios and tasks.

Three ways are worth highlighting in relation to how Au sought to apply the second principle – the notion of a culturally responsive approach. First, she devised what she calls the 'experience-text-relationship' (ETR, see Au 1997: 191). Before any text is read the KEEP teacher engages her small group in a discussion that is labelled 'experience' – the reference to 'experience' signifies what is important in the content of the lesson. Discussion is focused directly on children's experiences relevant to what the teacher knows the content of the story to be. The payoff here is twofold: for the children it evokes those concepts that will be most useful in comprehending the text to come; and for the teacher, it displays the children's ideas so misconceptions can be discussed and missing ideas introduced. The teacher then moves to the text and together they read and discuss parts of it. Finally, the R-phase involves the pupils in making links between the text and their own background experiences. This phase is considered vital since it allows for the Vygotskian idea of the weaving together of abstract and everyday concepts.

The second noteworthy point about how a culturally responsive curriculum is applied bears on the interactional patterns. In most Western classrooms, interaction continues to be dominated by what is known as the Initiation Response Feedback (IRF) pattern. The teacher initiates an interaction with a question to the pupils, a pupil is selected to respond and the teacher follows the pupil's response with some kind of feedback comment. This interactional pattern is especially evident in whole-class settings but also in small group work (e.g. Hall 2002). This style of interaction encourages pupils to be competitive and to perform as individuals, possibly reflecting Western values.

In the small group discussions of the literature they have read or shared, interaction in the KEEP classrooms gradually takes on an overlapping-turn structure similar to the overlapping speech that is common in ordinary Hawaiian conversations. A particular style of interaction known as 'talk-story' (Au 1997: 197) emerges and is permitted to emerge in these discussions. In talk-story in the community, a story is co-narrated by more than one person, and the speech of the narrators is also overlapped by others in the group. In this setting the skilled speaker is one who knows how to involve others in the conversation – this person does not dominate the conversation. Since they are familiar with this kind of speech event outside school, the pupils introduce it into their story discussions in school. So the pupils work together to answer the teacher's questions. The KEEP teacher, appreciative and knowledgeable of the children's family and community culture, is willing to relax her control of turn-taking and allow more than

one child to speak at a time as long as what is being said is relevant to the discussion.

An explains that in many Hawaiian families cooperation rather than competition is seen as important for the well-being of the extended family. Individual achievement is less highly prized than group contributions that benefit the family. In school lessons talk-story appears to be successful as it reflects this family emphasis on cooperation. Interestingly, as they get into the upper grades of the primary school, Hawaiian children do not like to be singled out in front of their peers, even to be praised.

A third feature of practice in this programme is teaching and learning from siblings and peers. In addition to teacher-led lessons, pupils benefit from assisting and being assisted by peers. Again their home culture prepares them to participate in teaching and learning interactions with peers. Hawaiian children are used to caring for siblings, being cared for by siblings and seeking help from siblings as well as from adults. It seems teaching-learning interactions with adults are less common in Hawaiian families than in mainstream households where adults may provide children with almost constant companionship. Friendship groups are also important, although the dynamics of such groups seem far from simple and teachers are trained to be sensitive to the roles and dynamics that can operate in peer groups. The implication for classrooms is that, because they respond so well in situations where they can work cooperatively, much learning can be carried out in pairs, triads and small groups. Almost all the scholars interviewed for this book talked about 'paired reading' or 'partner reading' or 'buddy reading' – such practices are common and highly successful in this programme.

This example suggests to me that programmes based on socio-cultural principles are promising for improving literacy among pupils who do not come from middle-class backgrounds – pupils whose home and community culture may not align with the traditional school culture of literacy. The underlying premise of this statement is that education must be concerned about equity and fairness.

### **Influence of the socio-cultural perspective**

What this perspective has given us are richer and more nuanced ways of conceptualizing, teaching, and studying reading. The research explored in this part of the book has made us appreciate the significance of the question 'What is reading for?' to the learner. For example, Moss's recent work in the UK (2000) and Solsten's in the US (1993) has shown that, unlike girls, some boys associate reading more negatively as children's business rather than adults' business, and as work rather than as play. Such findings give insights into the factors that hinder (or enhance) people becoming enthusiastic readers.

There is evidence over the past decade or so that those working in the whole-language tradition are increasingly embracing socio-cultural principles into their practice (e.g. Cazden 1992). However, it is reasonable to conclude that the ideas enshrined in this perspective are not prioritized in current literacy policy in England. Having said that, however, elements like partner reading, cooperative group work and reciprocal teaching, strategies described more fully in Part Two, are encouraged in the *National Literacy Strategy*. Such collaborative approaches are highly consistent with socio-constructivist perspectives on learning and as such acknowledge the significance of context and the learner's meaning in literacy events.

**PART FOUR**  
A SOCIO-POLITICAL  
PERSPECTIVE

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